

The Low-Down on Sodium

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February is American Heart Month. Let's talk about sodium and how it can play into heart health. Sodium is an essential mineral for our bodies. It helps with nerve function, muscle contractions, and maintaining fluid balance. Not enough sodium can be life threatening. The FDA and American Heart Association recommends sodium intake to be between 1,500mg – 2,300mg daily. Americans get an average of 3,400mg daily, which is more than double the lowest guideline. In this case, more isn't better. Too much sodium which has its own list of health risks including fluid retention, increased risk for high blood pressure, kidney disease, osteoporosis, and stomach cancer.

70% of the sodium we get in the US is from heavily processed foods and restaurant foods that have salt added in as a flavoring agent, preservative, or both. If you have a diet primarily of canned/boxed soups & meals, deli meats, bread/roll/crackers, and higher salt cheeses, it is very easy to get above 2,300mg in a day. To put this into prospective, 2.300 mg of sodium is only about 1 teaspoon of salt!

When it comes to cutting back on salt, there are a few tricks I recommend. Our tastebuds get used to the salty taste so if you cut back on salt too quickly odds are your food is going to taste bland. The good news is our tastebuds can be reaccustomed. Slow changes are key. Slowly change to low sodium options or change from a processed to a homemade version of that food. Start reducing the salt you cook with or add to your meal by a small amount at a time. Use other ways to add flavor without salt. Dried/fresh herbs or spices, onion, and garlic all add flavor without any sodium.

What about sea salt (or other salts) vs table salt? Is sea salt truly the "healthy salt" it's claimed to be? Both table salt, sea, and kosher salt contain about 40% of sodium. So no real reduction in sodium by changing to a different salt. Sea salt can contain trace amounts of minerals like magnesium and potassium but the amounts are minimal and adding more sea salt to get more of those minerals just increases the sodium you're eating. A healthier choice is to pick the salt you like the flavor of, use it sparingly and add other foods into your diet that are high in other minerals while being low in salt.

Another way to help reduce sodium is by eating enough potassium in a day. Potassium is another essential mineral and it can help your body excrete excess sodium consumed and help relax blood vessels (can help in lowering blood pressure). Women need about 2,600mg and men 3,400mg daily to reap these benefits and unfortunately most fall short. Tomatoes, beets, corn, potatoes, avocados, bananas, dried fruit, peaches, and oranges are all examples of high potassium produce. Consuming 3 cups of milk a day and eating a variety of protein foods (beef, fish, lentils, dried beans, nuts, seeds) can help you reach your daily potassium goal.

Salt-Free Taco Seasoning

2 Tbsp chili powder
2 tsp ground cumin
1.5 tsp garlic powder

1 tsp onion powder
1 tsp dried oregano
¼ tsp paprika powder

1/4 tsp cayenne (optional)

Mix all ingredients and store in airtight container. Use about 2 TB per 1 lb ground meat.